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NURSING IN MISSION STATIONS

SOME NURSING PROBLEMS IN AFRICA¹

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When I thought of nursing problems in Africa, the subject seemed a vast and complicated one and I realized that in one short paper I could give little idea of conditions as they really exist. I was obliged to be both doctor and nurse² and it was no light responsibility to make diagnosis, prescribe and care for the patients who were frequently in grave condition before coming to me. As there was no other doctor or nurse within several days' journey, the patients (natives), would frequently be brought long distances. For the white people I would sometimes go two or three days' journey to care for them, incidentally caring for the natives on the way.

One of the first and probably the biggest problem to deal with is the witch doctor who has great power over the people since they believe implicitly that when they are ill they are bewitched by an evil spirit. The witch doctor is supposed to possess the power of discerning who the individual or individuals are who have bewitched the patient. Each small village has a king and a witch doctor. When anyone is ill the doctor asks the king to assemble the people and he points out those who have bewitched the sick person. These people are condemned to die by taking poison as this is the only way to kill the evil spirits. When they are dead, if the patient does not get well, that is proof that there are other evil spirits (never that the witch doctor has made a mistake in his selection), and the people are again assembled and the victims again take poison. This is kept up until the patient either recovers or dies. If he dies that means that there are still evil spirits and perhaps as many as ten or fifteen people will be given poison and buried with him. They most strongly believe that if they are innocent they will not die from the poison and as each individual knows that he or she is innocent, they believe that the poison cannot hurt them. The witch doctor occasionally takes the poison to convince them that it cannot hurt the innocent but he has the privilege of mixing it himself and the advantage of knowing the antidote. At times when the victim protests that he is innocent a heated

¹ Read at a meeting of the New York County Nurses' Association.

² Miss Ward spent over three years in Congo Free State, Southwest Africa, as missionary among the Ki-Fiote people.

knife will be applied and if any of the skin pulls away with the knife that is infallible proof that he is guilty. The witch doctor is not afraid to show that his skin never adheres but then he heats the knife and takes good care that it does not reach the temperature where it is possible for it to adhere. In the selection of the victims to take poison, if there are those who had been working for white people and have accumulated a few yards of cloth which the witch doctor and king would like to have, they are almost sure to be pointed out as being possessed of the evil spirit or, if there are sick or aged and they want to get rid of them, the list is made long enough to include them too.

Because of this poison giving, when anyone is taken ill they are nearly always forsaken by their families. Sometimes the mother even denies knowing her own children. They feel that if they claim not to know them, they will hardly be blamed with having bewitched them, so you will readily see how very slim their chance of recovery is. Then, too, the witch doctor is very jealous of his power and always a fast friend of the king. He does not hesitate to stir up the people and make them feel that if the patient had been brought to him, as he should have been, everything would have been all right.

A man has as many wives as he can buy and when the women lose their husband they are obliged to sit in the hut and keep the fire smouldering while the body is being smoked, which may be anytime from four or six weeks to six months. During all this time their faces must be covered, they cannot leave the hut or see anyone and woe be to the woman who would dare complain that it was in the least disagreeable to be in there: all this practically on the equator, with a smouldering fire, no chimney or window and the one small door tightly closed. Doubtless much of their time is occupied wondering whether or not they will be among the victims to be given poison or otherwise put to death when the final day of the funeral comes. After the funeral the house is burned and everything the man owned is either buried with him or piled up on his grave. The one great ambition of the native is to have things to put on the grave. No one will use or even enter a house where anyone has died so the hospital problem is a very big one, even with the more enlightened natives.

We might go into infinite detail about this giving of poison but we have only touched on it to show how difficult the work is when this thing has to be contended with all the time.

One thing that always puzzled me was their wonderful recuperative power. Many times I have left patients feeling that they could not live many hours and would be utterly amazed in going back to find them sitting up and chatting as though nothing had been the matter. The first

time it happened I thought the man had died and the friends had taken the body. When the boys insisted that he was all right I went outside and found him sitting around the fire enjoying himself very much. One evening I went to see a man who was ill with pneumonia. I did not think he had much chance of living through the night. I did what I could and told them to send a messenger in the morning to let me know how he was and I would send medicine. Imagine my surprise when he not only walked in, but sat in chapel all through service and then walked back to his village. I might cite numerous similar instances. As soon as the crisis is over they seem to be all right. This might be accounted for by the fact that they do not lead a strenuous life.

Pneumonia is rather prevalent, especially among those who have come in contact with white people and formed the habit of wearing clothes. They are exceedingly fond of display and in the morning will put on everything they own. If it rains during the day, they take everything off and lie down on top of it to keep it dry and then decide that it isn't worth while dressing again that day. Clothing may finally become a blessing but in the early stages I fear a good many lives have been sacrificed to the indiscriminate wearing of everything one-half of the day and then appearing in native costume the other half. As a rule they are poorly developed, except in a few localities. This is quite largely due to the fact that they do not have proper nourishment. The land is rich and they can all have as much of it as they please but if their grandfathers only had two goats and three chickens and planted only fifty square yards of beans or corn, they never can see why they should have any more. Things grow practically without toil but in spite of it, there are long seasons when there is great scarcity of food. This, together with the fact that much of their time is spent in idleness, would largely account for their poor physical condition. The women are owned by the men, are entirely subordinate to them and always have to take second place.

The women are most anxious to have children and are very devoted to them. The men have taken advantage of this desire and have told the women that if they eat certain articles of food any time in life, they will never have children, so the delicacies are always left for the men and boys. For instance, no one would persuade an African girl or woman to eat an egg because they thoroughly believe that if they did they would never have a child. The families are always small, five being the largest I ever saw and the average is probably not more than two. When a mother dies and leaves a small baby they feed it on beans, fish, plantains etc., so the baby lives only a few days. As a rule they nurse the children until they are four or five years of age. The mother will work in the

field all day with the baby tied to her side and the child helps itself whenever it feels like it. This makes the breast on the left side enormously large, so that it not infrequently hangs down below the waist while the right one remains normal size.

The jiggers, like the mosquitoes, are ever present. They differ, however, in that the mosquitoes bite and go, while the jiggers bite and stay. Their choice resting place is under the nail. As soon as they get under, they surround themselves with a little sack in which the eggs are laid. If you are vigilant and remove this carefully at the right time you will seldom have trouble but if it is neglected serious conditions will follow. I knew of one gentleman who thought he would like to show his friends what a jigger could do and proposed keeping one in his foot until he returned home, with the result that the limb was amputated at Canary Islands. You may judge then what it means to the natives, especially to the children, who sit on the ground practically all day so that the hands, feet and buttocks become literally filled with jiggers. Frequently they have nothing better to remove them with than a sharp jointed piece of wood, the more fortunate ones having a worn down trading knife which is an enormous knife about the size of the ordinary carving knife. I leave it to you to imagine what the child endures, who has probably fifty or more jiggers to be removed.

The bodies of the women are extensively tattooed by making incisions and raising up the skin. This is repeated many times until the skin stands out in very prominent ridges thus marking the patterns. The more extensive the tattooing and the larger the ridges, the bigger will be the price which she will bring in marriage. As all this is usually done with the jigger knife, I need hardly say that they are practically always ill after it but this is all taken as matter of fact and they just wait a few weeks until they are better and then the process is repeated.

They occasionally have a war but everybody runs as soon as they see smoke and I never heard of anyone receiving an injury in battle. They do, however, injure themselves quite severely by stumbling in the forests or by falling from the trees which they climb daily for the palm wine.

We all know of the ivory and rubber caravans but only those who have seen the poor men toil under their enormous burdens can have much appreciation of what it means. The witch doctor usually supplies these men with various charms, one, for instance, around the ankle to prevent them from getting tired; another to prevent heart or lung complications, etc. The evil spirits however will disregard the charms and the poor men not only become tired but many times ill and it is not unusual for them to die on the way. Their fellow carriers, too much absorbed with

their own burdens, simply throw the bodies into the jungle, carrying with them, however, the ivory for which they must account.

The name Ki-Fiote means "insignificant" and quite expresses their opinion of themselves. They are always trying to find someone to lead them and think for them, and it is because this country lacks leaders and because there are continual feuds between the different villages, which prevent their intermingling, that these conditions exist.

Nursing problems may seem a misnomer for this paper. However there are great problems and I believe that if a sufficient number of nurses were interested, we could do much toward solving them.

TOO LATE FOR CLASSIFICATION

IDAHO

THE IDAHO STATE BOARD OF EXAMINATION AND REGISTRATION OF GRADUATE NURSES will hold examinations of applicants in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, September 12, and in Boise, Idaho, September 23, 1914. Apply to the secretary, Napina Hanley, 309 Washington Street, Boise, for particulars.

Napina Hanley, R.N.

ARKANSAS

THE ARKANSAS STATE BOARD OF NURSE EXAMINERS will hold a meeting at the State Capitol in Little Rock, Thursday and Friday, October 1 and 2. All applications must be in the hands of the secretary-treasurer, Mrs. F. W. Aydlott, (1200 Park Avenue) not later than September 15, 1914.